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ABSTRACT

The issue of the permanent absence of some countries and/or libraries in the Preservation and Conservation sessions at the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) has been raised in years past. Within Europe, contributions from South Europe have been scarce. This paper discusses responses to a survey of national libraries of South Europe that was conducted to determine the reasons why these libraries do not appear at the international level. The survey questions focused on: internal activities in each library in the field of preservation and conservation; preservation and conservation national activities in the correspondent country including institutional cooperation; and international cooperation. The survey structure considered three levels: the library itself as a first level; the national scene as an intermediary level; and the international level as the broadest one. The paper concludes that it is clear that South Europe libraries face limitations concerning preservation and conservation, and that training in the field of preservation management should not be delayed. (AEF)

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Preservation and Conservation in South Europe: a survey among National Libraries

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1. Reasons for a survey

It has been felt along the years, and often a topic raised, the permanent absence of some countries and/or libraries in the Preservation and Conservation sessions at IFLA. Within Europe, contributions from South Europe have been scarce. The same can be said about Africa, Asia or Latin and South America. Therefore, topics approached, viewpoints expressed reflect needs and developments as they are felt and happen both in North Europe, and in United States. This partial knowledge, and lack of balance was again raised last year at IFLA Boston during the Standing Committee meetings. After some discussion, it was decided to approach national libraries of South Europe in order to try to find out the reason, or reasons, why these libraries do not appear at the international level. Should the current survey provide us with some data, and it may happen that it will lead to a fruitful cooperation among all of us.

2. Survey goals

The set of questions as they were organized aimed to find out

1. internal activities in each library in the field of preservation and conservation
2. preservation and conservation national activities in the correspondent country including institutional cooperation
3. international cooperation.

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In the course of designing the questionnaire, I always felt curiosity to know a little about preservation and conservation activities being carried out within each institution. To understand the local available "know how" may very well define a future international cooperation. I still have the feeling that there must be a relation between what the institution is carrying out, its capabilities, and its relationship with other institutions. Our colleague Hans Jansen, from the Royal Library at The Hague, thought to go straightforward to the broader level skipping then the more internal aspects. After all, and taking in consideration that the inclusion of questions about internal activities would not make the questionnaire too heavy or too long, the final decision was to keep those questions.

So, the questionnaire tried to combine three different levels of data. To me, if nothing else, having an indication about works being carried out is like a light shining at the end of the tunnel. At least, counterparts have been identified, as well as their working lines, and the sort of technical orientation being given. We have partners sharing similar problems and difficulties all over; we need now to find ways to share their experiences at the international scene.

3. Questions and answers: analysis of a survey

All libraries approached replied. I must admit that I felt this very plain fact as a first victory since we were not sure to get answers from all six national libraries: Lisbon, Madrid, Barcelona, Rome, Florence and Athens. It is never too much to thank them again. The choice of national libraries to carry out the survey was merely due to the central role those libraries perform in their own countries. Eventually there are other libraries with a saying on this field but to follow their track would have made very hard this first approach.

When analysing the answers, it was not possible always to follow strictly the survey structure since often answers to one question bring together information which would fit much better in a different chapter. Bearing this in mind, I gathered all information available concerning the same issue under one single topic in order to make it understandable. I hope I have managed to make it successfully.

The survey structure considered three levels: the library itself as a first level; the national scene as an intermediary level; and the international level as the broadest one.

1st. level – THE LIBRARY ITSELF

The existence of a programme – Two libraries confirmed they have an orientating document in what concerns preservation and conservation. Other libraries recognize they do not have a written programme. If libraries admit they do not have a written programme, then in fact they are telling us that programmes can exist under other formats but they are also admitting that written programmes may be the right alternative. For further contacts with libraries now approached, it would be useful to bring this issue into discussion, trying to compare progress and achievements in libraries with, and without written programmes. The two libraries with some sort of a programme clarify that programmes were defined by the libraries themselves. That is, programmes were prepared according to their own capabilities, therefore their responsibility is much larger. On the whole, the interesting thing to bear in mind is that the option for a programme does not seem to be very popular. It seems then appropriate to wonder how useful is a written programme? Whether there is really a need to have a written programme? Or whether the absence of a programme is a matter of urgency?

The programme goals – To specify a goal is not a minor task. If programmes are somehow unclear, then it would be hopeless to expect clear and sharp goals. Most libraries surveyed define their objectives around a collection, or a set of documents. A global strategy is easily replaced by a very narrow intervention. Some libraries are honest enough to admit they have no objectives. Some others define their objective as "the

best possible preservation and conservation of manuscripts and printed holdings in the library". This statement is as naïve as the objective is vague but in my opinion it show how difficult it is for some libraries to understand the situation they are in, to set a list of priorities. Can anyone deny we have here some hints for further work?

Proceeding without a programme – Following previous answers, not all libraries were in the position to explain how they proceed without a programme. Some libraries ignore the core question, and explain their work keeps going thanks to a close collaboration between departments responsible for collections and reading rooms, and the preservation and conservation department; some other libraries explain their work referring to a strong intervention of the library's board imposing its viewpoint from top to bottom. Some others yet keep doing things following S.O.S. calls, moving from one problem to another, from one department into another. According to my viewpoint, the question about the existence of a programme was an embarrassing one. A programme is not fundamental to guarantee that work proceeds, and the current answers seem to confirm it. Conversely a programme may prove to be essential to carry out an effective work, and this weakness comes out from answers gathered. I felt it as I was reading the answers; I am sure each library when trying to answer came to an identical conclusion. If they felt the incoherence of their answers, the survey was then worthy of being done.

Preservation and conservation output – Suddenly answers given sound enthusiastic: although at different levels, libraries mention their achievements: boxing and enclosures, current binding, microfilming, digitisation, training, hygienisation and pest control, collections survey and maintenance. A little bit of everything. The idea coming out from the survey is that most of work is done in the library whether reproduction including microfilming, or restoration or even maintenance. Libraries consider that reproduction including microfilming is an activity involving a lot of human resources. We have then to acknowledge that essential techniques are well spread around. A preservation and conservation programme will include all of these, and more. Therefore if libraries do not have a programme as such, or find difficult to have a programme, the explanation has to be found out away of technicalities.

Human resources for preservation and conservation - Libraries list the staff members they have. Between 9 and 32 members we find all kind of expertise: conservators, technicians, binders, librarians, microfilming operators. Permanent members of staff, but also staff under contract. The situations described are very different although the question did not aim to find out figures but to understand whether libraries were able to solve their problems relying upon internal resources, or whether libraries to proceed with their projects have to look for external help. Following how the human resources are allocated in libraries surveyed one can understand they have priorities despite their declaration about the lack of objectives. After all, and in practical terms, libraries make an effort to develop coherent working lines.

The budget – For all libraries the budget is closely linked to the problem of human resources, and it is not specifically related with the use of technologies. Some technologies can be complex; their application can be hard but problems arise due to the availability or not of qualified manpower. Some libraries do not have a budget of their own; some libraries run budgets smaller than 40 thousand euros; some others run budgets larger than 2 million euros. Such a discrepancy among libraries with equal responsibilities within European Union is likely to interfere with their expectations, and their ability to develop projects, and to cooperate. How can any library to commit itself to cooperation, whether national or international, if the money is virtually non existing?

Technical expertise on preservation and conservation – All libraries but two feel they have the technical expertise they need to proceed with their works and/or projects in house. According to my appreciation, only apparently this is a good thing. If libraries feel they can find in house answers to all their problems, then why bother identifying partnerships, finding collaboration or whatever way of sharing information

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and knowledge? If libraries indeed feel self-sufficient, regardless whether they are right or wrong, motivation to cooperate is likely to be a very low one.

Availability of archival quality raw materials – Despite the fact that all libraries are within the European Union, it is not exactly the same thing to buy materials locally or to import them. All of them. The problem does not arise due to transport or to price; it is a question of variety of offer and choice, and possibility to discuss with vendors, and learn from them. Of course all libraries are able to purchase the archival quality materials they want. But while for some libraries everything is only available through catalogues, for others a call or a visit are the routine. Browsing catalogues may be very interesting as a starting point; it becomes a trap when is the definitive and exclusive option. Picking up information and news exclusively by the book affects selection criteria, affects future application, therefore the results of the output. What one has to consider is how often this constraint interferes with work, and with motivation to carry on one's work, or to launch new projects.

2nd. level – THE NATIONAL LEVEL

Initiatives at the national level – Apart one joint project, and two occasional joint actions, cooperation seems an empty concept. Libraries live on their own. Regardless their national responsibilities, they do not mention initiatives involving other institutions whether libraries, archives or museums. Why is this no library gives an explanation. One library nevertheless points out that among its responsibilities, cooperation has not been considered. Even this explanation is too vague. Since cooperation cannot be enforced by law, we should be looking for some other good reason to explain this South Europe well spread attitude. From thirteen questions around "national preservation initiatives", all we got was a solid silence. Needless to say that in what concerns the existence of an organisational structure, or a specific allocated budget, apart the complaints of one single library, the answers were also vague, or non existing. No national structure whatsoever to promote cooperation. We could not find out either about the level of awareness for preservation and conservation. Lack of awareness could indicate the need to launch training initiatives whichever format, and length. Unfortunately this set of questions worked out as a communication barrier. No answers, no information, no hints. Only one library perceives collaboration as an aim to improve understanding among institutions. No library takes institutional collaboration as a step to further cooperation. Cooperation which is a trivial thing among North European libraries sounds very alien to the South. Unfortunately, this chapter was a fiasco.

3rd. level – THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

After the results obtained about the national level, it would be difficult to expect flourishing answers at the broadest level. Nevertheless, libraries found courage to say something, and to break the barrier. When answering, libraries dare to complain. So, they know what is wrong but the capacity to change the situation seems to be out of their reach. Suddenly we are stepping into a different level: from institutional and technical borders we are penetrating into a different sphere. Libraries mention interferences against to any international connection; some others refer lack of initiative as the main reason; another one points out that a small budget prevents any international cooperation; some others regret the lack of cooperation but cannot explain it. My viewpoint is that there is not one single reason, and preservation and conservation professionals are not saying everything. The very obvious evidence comes out when libraries identify their needs. They require training, and they require translation programmes so that written information becomes available in their own language. Besides general training, one library wants training on "digital preservation" which is a very specific topic, and a highly technological one. Despite the lack of indication from another two libraries, my idea is that investment in training cannot be postponed. International initiatives must be organised because they will also become an opportunity to share others' experiences, and to motivate professionals for international actions.

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Conclusions

The important question cannot be eluded: do we understand better now what is going on in South Europe? My firm answer is yes, we do. We do not know much more but together, answers and the lack of them, give us indications about how to proceed. I myself come from South Europe; the situation is familiar, and I also felt difficulty to answer properly all questions. I would then take some conclusions:

1. weaknesses identified are at the organizational level not at the technical level. At different depths, all libraries develop significant working lines. Cleaning, pest control, boxing, microfilming; as they know what "archival quality" means. These are positive factors. The same cannot be said about a programme or any existing structure. Together, these organizational aspects look like alien to libraries surveyed. They reveal problems at the managerial level;

2. libraries did not seem to feel at ease in what concerns definition of objectives and goals. Of course, libraries are carrying out all sort of works, and they sound very active. But they seem to be concentrated over one specific document, or one specific difficulty. The goal of a programme is one particular intervention, and there is not any mention to the global situation. It might be that my conclusion is wrong but I felt a lack of strategic approach. If I am right, then the problem remains at the organisational and managerial level again;

3. as I perceive it, the lack of strategic view leads these libraries mainly to a curative intervention rather than to a preventive one. There is a strong emphasis on restoration work. Whether this represents a policy, or whether this happens against the professionals' will, it remains to be clarified;

4. libraries seemed surprised with questions about cooperation. I think it can be said that there is no cooperation whichever the country, the area or the extension. It is not then occasional if they never appear, on their own or associated with others, at the international scene. It looks like as a dividing line has been drawn between the South and the North. But as we have had the chance to witness, there is plenty of work going on this side of the line.

It is clear then that South Europe libraries in what concerns preservation and conservation face limitations. Limitations mainly out of the technical sphere. This is for sure a very positive aspect which has to be exploited for their benefit. There are partners all over Europe using the same tools. They need, and they want training. They ask for it. From what has been collected, it is my opinion, training in the field of preservation management should not be delayed. Should our colleagues agree with this conclusion, and both IFLA and LIBER should provide seminars and/or workshops corresponding to expectations expressed.

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